DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 554 CS 215 528

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TITLE Transcending Conventional Boundaries in Academic Discourse.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computers; *Discourse Modes; Higher Education; Hypermedia; Intellectual Disciplines; Literary Devices; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Processes; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; Boundaries; Computer Assisted Writing; *Scholarly Writing; Writing Style

ABSTRACT

Rather than having established forms available to pour things into, forms frequently need to be built from the ground up. Practically, it is simpler to use assembly line production for academic work, and most of academic writing is relatively linear objective prose. However, boundaries are being crossed in diverse disciplines by a number of scholars with a variety of agendas. One of the less common breaks with convention is fragmentation. For instance, multiple meanings can be created by deciding whether to read a fragment in relation to what came before or what follows. The computer has increased the ability to reduce the linearity of texts with hypertext, which allows the creation of links to several ideas at one time without privileging one aspect above another. Another of the most advanced changes in academic writing conventions is the inclusion of the personal voice and personal experience as evidence. Most writing that transgresses or transcends conventional boundaries is an amalgam of the classic essay and the academic article. (Examples illustrating the new styles are appended.) (CR)

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Transcending Conventional Boundaries in Academic Discourse

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The structure for this presentation eluded me for weeks. There were too many possibilities. That's one of the things that happens when conventional boundaries break down. Rather than having established forms available to pour content into, forms frequently need to be built from the ground up. **Practically**, it's simpler to use assembly line production for academic work. Establish argument, add supporting points, conclude. **Aesthetically**, new structures range from exciting to confusing, but I seldom pass by without interest. **Theoretically**, I believe solidity is an illusion; constant change and motion are my reality. So though it may not be the easiest nor most familiar route, I choose the unconventional time and again. Though as it turned out, I went with practicality with today's presentation and it's relatively conventional.

Though the exact structure varies from field to field, I think of most academic writing as relatively linear objective prose. In the humanities it's also primarily argument. Let me be clear that I have no problem with this being one way in which we present our scholarship. But it needn't be the only way. And in fact, it's not.

Though breaks with convention are not unique to our era, it may be that our various theories are affecting the ways in which we write. We see human agency at

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work in every enterprise, and we drop the shroud of objectivism. We theorize multiculturalism, a world of **equal** differences, and we question writing in binary hierarchies. We imagine a world filled with postmodern fragmentation, and our sentences and paragraphs begin to break apart. Some suggest that our current theorizing actually point to a major rift with the old, a paradigm shift of epistemic proportion.

I find these inter-relationships of theory and practice intriguing, but today I want to focus on academic writing itself. I've looked primarily at the work of professionals, scholars and writers, such as Susan Griffin, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jane Tompkins and Patricia Williams. And though I won't be talking about it today, I've also done research on unconventional writing being done by graduate students. All of this information has implications for what and how we teach. We may well continue to teach the same kinds of writing, but it would be wise to be careful how we define the contours of what makes a text academic. Research, theory, intellectual thought—yes. But how to present that information may be rather broadly enacted.

Whether you consider the kinds of writing I'm talking about to transcend (rise above) or transgress (illegally cross) conventional boundaries is probably, at the very least, political and ideological. But what I hope you'll accept is that these kinds of boundary crossings are happening in diverse disciplines by a number of scholars with a variety of agendas. It's not monolithic in any sense.

One of the less common breaks with convention is fragmentation. This can be used visually as small pieces of text on a page which may or may not be complete sentences and thoughts such as "For the Etruscans" by Rachel Blau Du Plessis' or much of Gloria Anzaldúa's work which also includes poetry, a genre in which fragmentation is stylistically normative. Or fragmentation may occur at the sentence level only. One of my favorite examples of this is on the top of your

handout. [see top of page 1 of handout at end of paper] Unlike Du Plessis or Anzaldúa, Trinh's writing is not visually fragmented at all, some paragraphs of text are 8-10 pages in length. Trinh's fragmentation occurs at the word and sentence level.

All kinds of fragmentation cause us to look for meaning beyond the usual sentence borders of capital letters and periods. Trinh's contradiction of such boundaries is expressed in the content as well as the structure. Multiple meanings are frequently created by the fragmentation as we try to decide whether to read a fragment in relation to what came before or what follows. Similarly, parenthesis or slashes within words and sentences are coming to fill this kind of function. [see second example of page 1 of handout at end of this document] Word play has always been an intellectual sport, but we might differ on whether or not it should be a formal one. A couple of years ago convention paper titles read as if it were a normative practice though that seems to be subsiding. The rise and fall suggesting that not all of these unconventional techniques will take root, some will pass on through.

Back to fragments — an underlying convention is exposed through their use, that of clarity. Though several theories have punctured holes in the premise that a text means what it says, I think for the most part we continue to write as if it is possible to clearly convey meaning through the use of language. I don't want to get into deconstruction here, but I do want to point out that clarity may not always be a writer's objective. Our use of jargon and highly subordinated sentences is one way of writing which makes clarity difficult. Another possibility is demonstrated by Trinh's value of paradox. She often seeks to complicate more than clarify an idea. Her fragments, run-ons and several page paragraphs reinforce this premise structurally. Many of the convention-breaking strategies that I examine add meaning in some way to the text. Meaning is added by exemplifying the premise as

Trinh's fragment example does, by questioning the coherency of textual meaning through fragmentation, or by associatively and metaphorically offering vignettes or quotations which the writer does not try to explain.

Such associative writing is often carried through another structural device which dislodges clarity—the use of multiple columns, usually two due to the constraints of page size. With our left to right reading strategy, the right column often seems to gloss the text on the left, thereby setting up primary and secondary status. [see last example on page 1 of handout at end of this paper] Seen as an attempt at dialogue or multiple perspectives, columns offer an interaction between pieces of text which is less easy to establish when the text flows linearly. But linear texts also attempt to embody multiple voices, often through the use of various fonts or font faces. You'll note Susan Griffin's text on the back of the handout alternates between italics and plain. This is the most common interplay, though not the only one. These kinds of options have opened up for many of us because of word processing and though most presses were resistant at first, many are starting to accept that some formatting options are chosen by writers to carry aspects of meaning; they're not just stylistic.

The computer has also increased the ability to reduce the linearity of texts. In the realm of hypertext, where writing must remain on computer, multiple links can lead readers on variant paths through material. Though the linearity of moving forward through time persists, the choice of the progression can be more easily reader generated than writer specified. Even if you haven't used hypertext you've no doubt heard about short stories or novels with multiple endings or perhaps you've surfed the net with all of the links and buttons on the web. Much more than endings can vary in this medium. Scholarly material can proceed in many directions at once. I often have the experience of halting in the midst of writing at my keyboard to decide what order to put the information in. Hypertext allows the

creation of links to several ideas at one time without privileging one aspect above another.

Coming back to the actual printed page, the inclusion of the personal is certainly one of the most advanced changes in terms of academic writing conventions. In composition the use of the personal has been established, challenged, reestablished. Many of us readily recognize values of personal writing while we're also cognizant of the problems it can cause students in many classrooms. Use of personal voice and personal experience as evidence while widespread are not automatically acceptable to all academics.

I'd like to take my last few minutes to look at a particular written structure, one which not only makes use of the personal but problematizes it as well. I chose this example because of the ways that it embodies it's content, giving visual form to the theory to explores. The text is from Susan Griffin's "Red Shoes." It appears at the beginning of a collection of academic articles called, "The Politics of the Essay" edited by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman. The editors point out that Griffin's essay is a "real" essay, distinguishing it as different than the rest of the collection which are mostly standard academic articles about women's essays. I think this is significant because much of the writing I'm talking about that transgresses or transcends conventional boundaries are really an amalgam of the classic essay and the academic article. To grossly overgeneralize some of the distinctions between the two, I'll say that the essay is more amorphous, often less rigorously cited (though frequently containing references), more exploratory, more writerly, and more accessible to a wider audience than the academic article. [see page 2 of handout]

[Follows oral discussion of Griffin's text on handout.]

When we sit down to read an academic text and find it defying our expectations, breaking conventions, we can get frustrated. Understandably. As someone who now both writes and reads unconventional and resistant academic texts, it's important for me to remember the difficulties unexpected styles can provoke. Expectations shape how we read. Genre distinctions are a big part of this. When we encounter a new genre or style, we're uncertain how to read, but repeated exposure to a different style adds it to our reading repertoire.

"Invoke the Name. Follow the norms. Of. The Well Written." (17)

Trinh T. Minh-ha. Woman, Native, Other. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1989.

Mother('s) Tongue Subject in/of/to history and his story

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A part apart.

Totalization no more.

Postmodernism challenges us to no longer assume that wholeness exists. Unitary subjects and objects are creations of our ideological imaginations of old. In the new time, we dismantle the borders that have maintained identities of totality. Looking across the borderless field we see fragmentations that may or may not be connected to one another. Differentiations are not to be feared; they were present all along—merely invisible to our totalizing eyes.

"Totalization is therefore defined at one time as useless, at another as impossible" (Derrida 967).

"Partiality...becomes a political necessity as part of the discourse of locating oneself within rather than outside of history and ideology" (Giroux 464).

A mestiza consciousness "keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (Anzaldúa 80).

fragment from my "Atlas of Academic Writing: Viewed Postmodernly," unpublished

Anzaldúa, Gloria. Borderlands: The New Mestiza. SF: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute Press, 1987. 65-75.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Literary Criticism and Theory: The Greeks to the Present. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Laurie Fink. NY: Longman, 1989. 959-971.

Giroux, Henry. "Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity." A Postmodern Reader. Ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993. 452-496.

The imprisonment which was at one and the same time understood as the imprisonment of the female mind has a larger boundary, and that is the shape of thought itself within Western civilization. (1)

It is an early memory. Red Shoes. Leather straps criss-crossing. The kind any child covets. That color I wanted with the hot desire of a child.

On one level, one thinks simply of the conditions of imprisonment which affected, for instance, the intellectual life of George Sand. How it was necessary for her to dress like a man in order to attend the theatre with her friends. She wanted to be in the section just beneath the stage, and women were not allowed in that section. This transgression was a necessary one if she was going to, as she did, enter the realm of public discourse within her mind.

When was it I first heard the title of the film, "The Red Shoes"? ...

...Writing of his experience of torture, Jean Améry recalls that "one never ceases to be amazed that all those things one may...call his soul, or his mind, or his consciousness, or his identity are destroyed when there is that cracking and splintering in the shoulder joints." It is this that is humiliating, and as Améry writes, "The shame of destruction cannot be erased." (6)

After a time, I leave my bench and walk up the tiers of the amphitheatre. I hope to catch a glimpse of these two women. In my imagination I have already given the speaker a rich mystical life. But they are gone.

Such a memory is perhaps more easily recalled when it is only an abstraction of itself. One says, "I was tortured," or, "I had a difficult childhood," without entering the experience in any concrete way, and thus also without reliving the feeling of destruction. But sensuality and abstraction are mutually dependent. In the mind, the capacities are inseparable.

I had wanted to see the old woman's face. There was something in the tone of her voice which lead me to believe she had crossed that barrier which we so often erect against what is seen. Did she fall into the color of the rose?

Fiction, as opposed to the essay, is often viewed as an escape from reality....

Is it possible to write in a form that is both immersed and distant, far-seeing and swallowed? I am thinking now that this is what women have been attempting in the last decades. Not simply to enter the world of masculine discourse, but to transform it with another kind of knowledge. (11)

Griffin, Susan. "Red Shoes." The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives. Ed. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. 1-11.